

S-E-C-R-E-T

30 May 1974

MEMORANDUM:

SUBJECT : Syria's Rulers and Their Political Environment

The Men

Syria's leaders are soldiers, socialists, and from the provinces rather than the big cities. They are also relatively young, mostly in their early forties. Each of these characteristics effects the nature, outlook, and policies of the government in Damascus.

The *army* has been the principal agent of political change in Syria since that country achieved its independence at the end of World War II, ruling directly or in association with political groups for most of that time. Once celebrated for the frequency of its military revolts, Syria is no longer the erratic coup-prone cockpit of inter-Arab politics it was in the 1950s and early 1960s. President Asad, a career officer and former head of the air force, reached the heights of power by carefully building a network of well-placed supporters in the army. He continues to maintain this system; his brother commands a key security unit, for example. Asad was a founding member of a group which has been dominant within the Syrian army -- the military organization of the Baath Party -- for over ten years. He survived many changes within that group until he came to control it himself.

The Arab *Socialist* Baath (Resurrection) Party is the vehicle through which Asad governs. Founded in Damascus nearly thirty years ago with the goals of liberating and unifying all Arab countries, it has been an important force seeking to develop socialism in an Arab framework. It has been plagued with factionalism, and rival Baath organizations now govern Iraq and

S-E-C-R-E-T

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Syria, each claiming to be the sole legitimate party. Broader Arab considerations were pushed into the background after the failure of Syria and Egypt to make a success of the United Arab Republic (1958-1961). Since taking power in 1963, the Baath and its soldiers have concentrated on Syrian concerns and interests, with particular attention to improving social and economic conditions for the rural areas from which its leaders came. Syria's socialism is a moderate one; half the economy is in private hands.

Key military figures, including President Asad, Defense Minister Talas, and Interior Minister Zaza, as well as a majority of cabinet members and civilian Baath Party leaders are from *provincial* towns and villages. These men have supplanted Syria's former rulers, who were drawn from merchant-absentee landlord families, centered in Damascus, Aleppo and other cities and were almost exclusively Sunni Muslim in religion.\* In the late 1940s, when Hafiz al-Asad was a secondary school student, about to join the Baath Party, it was inconceivable that he, from an undistinguished provincial family and an Alawi as well, could become President of Syria. The position was legally reserved to a member of the dominant Sunni Muslim majority and an urban leader of that community always filled it. It is a measure of the change that the Baath and the soldiers have wrought in Syria that members of minority groups, once relegated to secondary status, now may legally occupy any position in the country.

The relative *youth* of Syria's leaders has meant that their politically formative years came after Syria won independence. In those years, the key political issue of the country came to be the struggle of nationalists and progressives against the traditional leadership exercised by important families which combined large land holdings, commercial interests and political

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\* *Seventy percent of Syria's people are Sunni (orthodox) Muslims. Minorities, such as Alawi Muslims, who make up ten percent of the population, and Christians in the past could not aspire to the highest military and civilian posts.*

S-E-C-R-E-T

power. Syria's leaders of today are less concerned with the imperialists as enemies than, say, Nasser was. Moreover, the Syrian rulers have conclusively won out over the former ruling class.

#### Their Administration

Syria's leaders are proud of their record in office over the past decade. They have provided Syria with its longest stretch of stable government since independence. The only significant change between 1966 and the present occurred in November 1970 when Asad ousted his rivals within the Baath ruling group. Those rivals had born responsibility for the abortive Syrian military incursion into Jordan in support of the fedayeen in September 1970. Since Asad carried out his "corrective movement", as the event is known in Syria, he has extensively restaffed the upper echelons of the Party and government with his own supporters. Domestically, the Asad administration has done little that is different from its predecessor. It has pushed ahead improving the administration, trying to involve the population politically in a variety of mass political organizations, and working for economic betterment.

Politically, Syria is a country of the left; the center and right of Syrian politics were destroyed by the early 1960s. But it is a moderate leftism. Baath Party members hold the principal cabinet posts and dominate the administration, education, and the press. Other leftwing political movements, including the Communist Party, are included in a National Progressive Front, the cabinet, and a virtually powerless People's Assembly. Only the Baath is allowed to conduct political activity in the army.

Syrian pride and self respect at the achievements of recent years have undoubtedly been bolstered by the October war, in which the Syrian forces gave a respectable account of themselves. It was in fact a measure of Asad's confidence in the solidarity of his position, in the degree of authority he had, and of Syrian self-confidence in general that he agreed with Sadat to plan the dual attack on Israel, and that they actually carried it out (this involved a degree of state-to-state cooperation and trust, unique in post-World War II Arab affairs).

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

The Syrian Army has long been riven with factionalism, and this carries with it the possibility of efforts to change the leadership of the country by force. An attempt on Asad's life was made during the summer of 1973. Personal and factional infighting could, therefore, lead to Asad's ouster. Lacking extensive information on political attitudes, cliques, and personal aspirations of Syrian officers, we cannot gauge this with any precision. But the Syrian officer corps has, by virtue of its members' social origins and because advancement has been chiefly for loyalty to the Baath Party, become a fairly homogeneous group. If Asad were overthrown, his successor would most certainly be an officer of the Baath persuasion, sharing many of the same domestic social and economic goals. But Asad is noted for his pragmatism; a successor might be more of an ideologue or might not have the same views on foreign affairs.

#### Attitudes Toward External Matters

Syria has been a bitter opponent of Israel since 1948. In addition, Syria retains legacies deriving from a longstanding pro-Palestinian involvement. Damascus was an early and vigorous supporter of fedayeen extremist action against Israel. Since Asad took control, he has endeavored to make the fedayeen in Syria and, to the extent possible, in Lebanon responsive to the interests of the government in Damascus. But there is domestic opinion favoring Syrian policy strongly supportive of Palestinian rights. The existence of this opinion -- which is not measurable to any precise degree -- has limited Asad's freedom of maneuver in dealing with the Israelis. This is a constraint which, for example, does not effect Egypt to any serious extent.

Syria's relations with the West in modern times have been on the poor side. Damascus was a principal home of the Arab independence movement. Between the two world wars, Syrian politics consisted largely of a struggle to oust the French from the mandate over Syria. In the first decade of independence, Syrian politics centered on a struggle by nationalists and progressives to oust the conservative, monied landlord-merchant class, which looked to the West for support. Syria was an early opponent of US efforts to construct a Middle East defense grouping in the 1950s and otherwise to deny the Middle East to the Soviets. Moreover, Syrian leaders have lively memories of efforts sponsored by the

S-E-C-R-E-T

West in 1956 and 1957 to overthrow the left-leaning government in Damascus. The US took particular blame for its sponsorship of the 1957 attempt. Three diplomats were expelled, and evidence presented in the trials of accused plotters severely incriminated the US along with some neighboring states.

The Syrians have not let an antipathy to the West -- which has moderated some in recent years -- lead them into Eastern arms either. The Baathists are on good terms with a variety of communist and socialist parties and with communist states as diverse as Yugoslavia and North Korea, and of course the USSR. In the months since the October war, Syrian-Soviet interaction has increased; the Syrians have needed military supply and support, the Soviets want to retain influence in the area especially since Egypt has so publicly endorsed American initiatives. But still, for the Syrians friendship with the Soviet Union must not infringe on Syrian independence.

In the tricky situation following the October war, Syria wanted to get back territory but, uncertain and afraid of being thought of as weak or subject to pressure, it let others set the pace. Syria backed part way into accepting Resolution 242, where other Arabs openly did so, agreed to receive the Secretary only after he had been welcomed in many other major Arab capitals, and very slowly reduced its disengagement demands over months filled with clashes on the cease-fire line. (The Israeli attitude on disengagement with the Syrians was similar; indeed, each side harbors a profound distrust of the other's good faith.) The Syrians' attitude will continue to be one of caution, "how far can we go without losing face." It will probably be accompanied by a sort of truculence in dealing with outsiders which is a continuing feature of Syrian life.

The Syrians have done a pretty good job of resisting intrusion by outsiders both Eastern and Western, of building a new social system, of establishing themselves as important in Arab councils, and even of fighting Israel. They have now taken the first steps toward dealing with that country. But they are still not sure of themselves and of their position, and they continue to take refuge in truculence and negativism, attitudes which will be at least as apparent on the peace issue as on any other important Syrian interest.

- 5 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

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